

Factors in formula of happiness

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John Helliwell is the co-author of the World Happiness Report, an annual survey of how happy people are in countries around the world, published by the Earth Institute at the University of British Columbia. He was a keynote speaker at the Quality of Life Conference in Ajman last month.

q How important is happiness to the economic performance of a country?

a It's important as a country wants it to be. It's apparent over the past decade that there has been dissatisfaction with purely economic indicators. We have a variety of social indicators but what we lack is combining them to get some sort of overall measure. What's really different in the Happiness Report from other measures is that citizens themselves are asked to assess the quality of their own lives. We aggregate the results like votes in an election. It means happiness can be measured at a local level.

What can the government do to improve the quality of life for people?

I think the power of one is important, so everybody has the capacity to make life better for themselves. Governments are learning from the actions of individuals and we have examples of where improvements in the lives of some communities are copied in another. People are coming to realise that happiness is based on doing something for others and that's not something that generally makes its way in to conventional government decision-making and policy.

How closely linked to national income is happiness and quality of life?

Quite closely. If you look at what determines the happiness of the four most happy countries and the four most unhappy countries, income explains less than a quarter of the difference in happiness. Other important factors include a healthy life expectancy and the most important factor is social connections, so having someone to count on in times of trouble. Trust is very important and sharing is also important.

The events of the Arab Spring have suggested some people in the region are not happy. What do you make of that?

The UAE has been a very peaceful part of the region and lives have been happier here than in other parts of the region. One of the reasons for that probably is that there are higher levels of social connections, trust in government and each other, the police and generosity.

As the global economy emerges from recession, do you expect this year's survey to show people are more happy?

We have looked across countries post-2007, and the countries worst hit do lose happiness relative to others, especially the ones that have designed policies around improving happiness, like South Korea, which has shown substantial increases in happiness.

* Tom Arnold